

Chapter 10 Parks & Recreation

Introduction

The City's Parks and Recreation System and all components therein, has a considerable positive effect and influence on Harrisonburg citizen's quality of life, the health and well-being of its citizens, and community economic and environmental sustainability. The City is committed to a well developed Parks and Recreation System by offering diverse and varied activities, including improved health and stress reduction, adult and youth development programs, resource conservation and protection, flood protection, improved air quality, improved aesthetics, revenue generation, and enhanced property values.

Background

The City's commitment to improved parks and an excellent recreation program is demonstrated by its adoption of the Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan in 2003. This Master Plan describes existing conditions of the parks and recreation system, provides results of a citizen survey, sets standards for future park development and makes recommendations for needed improvements to the system. In addition, Master Plans for two parks have been completed and accepted by the City. These include the Smithland Road Park Master Plan completed in 2004 and the Ralph Sampson Park Master Plan completed in 2008. The reader is referred to the Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan 2003 for detailed background information that was used to develop this Comprehensive Plan's goals, objectives and strategies. The following summary background information is drawn from the executive summary of the master plan.

Survey of Citizens Recreation Interests

The main objective of the public survey was to obtain information on citizens' patterns of current use, preferences, and desires with the goal of understanding any current and future deficiencies in Parks and Recreation programs and facilities. Other objectives of the study were to discover effectiveness of the City's Parks and Recreation system as a service to the community, to gauge customer satisfaction and to determine the current level of use of City parks. The survey was conducted by telephone calls to 400 randomly selected respondents in each of the five voting precincts. A detailed analysis can be found in the appendix of the Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan 2003. The data gathered was tabulated and charted to reveal many facets of citizens' use patterns and needs. Some of the notable findings included:

- Approximately 85 percent of Harrisonburg residents use the Parks and Recreation system.
- Overall park use is distributed evenly over each voting precinct.
- Approximately 85 percent of Harrisonburg households rate their satisfaction with the Parks and Recreation system as good to excellent.
- Picnicking, swimming, hiking, biking and running were the activities most participated in by households.
- Soccer, football, golf, softball, baseball, basketball and tennis were the activities second most participated in by households.
- Sixty-five percent of Harrisonburg households visited museums as a leisure activity, 42 percent visited nature and interpretive centers.

- The top most requested improvements were a walking trail, bike trail, better security and activities for different age groups. Thirty percent of households had no suggested improvements to the Parks and Recreation system.
- The top most requested parks or facilities were a skateboard park, water parks and swimming pools, children's sports fields and walking/bike trails. Thirty-one percent of households had no suggested improvements to the Parks and Recreation system.
- The top most requested improvements to existing programs and classes were more variety of hours/scheduling, swimming classes, painting classes and better information of what classes are offered.
- Requests for new programs and activities were very diverse. Twenty-four percent of households had no suggestions for new classes or programs.
- The most desired leisure activities were concerts or music festivals, live theater, arts and crafts events, and sporting activities. Seventy percent of respondents did not know nor had any suggested improvements.
- Purcell, Hillandale, and Westover Parks were the most used parks overall by Harrisonburg households.
- Morrison, Purcell, and Westover Parks were the most frequently visited parks on average.
- Hillandale, Purcell, and Westover Parks were the most evenly used by residents of each of the five voting precincts.

Parks and Recreation Program Needs

The public survey and the comparative analysis of level of use standards revealed several shortfalls and needs for improvements in the Parks and Recreation system. Many of the needs expressed were in the area of athletic fields, walking trails, swimming pools, indoor hard courts and expanded programs for youth activities. A high demand was expressed for soccer and softball/baseball facilities. This was due to intensive use of existing facilities and the popularity of these sports with the general population as well as specific ethnic groups. In an analysis of available park acreage and distribution of parks by neighborhoods and voting precincts, it became evident that the population was relatively well served by larger community parks. However, the availability and distribution of neighborhood and mini parks was generally deficient. The east side of the City is the least well served by these types of parks. This area is where much of the expected population growth is speculated to occur.

The following summarizes the major recommendations of the Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan 2003:

- Purchase or dedicate sufficient land for several new neighborhood parks in the Waterman, Stone Spring, and Simms voting precincts.
- Develop several new mini parks in urban areas around the City.
- Expand and redevelop existing community and neighborhood parks, taking advantage of underutilized spaces.
- Support and develop a City-wide greenway system that includes connections to parks, schools and community facilities.

- Expand the Cecil F. Gilkerson Community Center to include additional hard court space, auxiliary gym, improved site circulation and parking, expanded activity rooms and expanded swimming facilities.
- Provide additional youth athletic fields and programs.
- Provide additional youth programs and activities.
- Expand program staffing, volunteers and hours for programs and classes where appropriate.
- Develop the Smithland road property as a major community and athletic park with amenities for the neighborhood in that area.
- Begin planning and development of a new Community Recreation Center in the southeastern sector of the City. The center should be accessible to the general public by mass transportation as well as by walking and bicycling.
- Provide a conveniently located facility for events and performances.
- Develop several new athletic fields including soccer, football, softball and baseball.

The goal, objectives, and strategies listed below focus on the physical facilities recommendations of the Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan 2003.

Parks & Recreation Goal, Objectives and Strategies

Goal 9. To meet the recreation needs of every citizen by providing comprehensive leisure opportunities and developing and maintaining a safe, well-distributed park and recreation system.

Objective 9.1 To continue to support and market Harrisonburg's parks and recreation system as a major community benefit and indirect revenue generator by implementing the Comprehensive Recreation and Parks Master Plan 2003.

Strategy 9.1.1 To incorporate by reference into this Comprehensive Plan the recommendations, policies, and proposals of the Comprehensive Recreation and Parks Master Plan 2003.

Strategy 9.1.2 To implement the recommendations of the Comprehensive Recreation and Parks Master Plan 2003 starting with the identified 2003-2005 priorities.

Strategy 9.1.3 To establish and maintain a riparian buffer on the creek banks of Blacks Run in Purcell Park to help protect and clean run-off and ground water going into Blacks Run.

Objective 9.2 To integrate parks and recreation programs fully into the City's environmental programs and policies.

Strategy 9.2.1 To assign Parks and Recreation Department staff to work with the Department of Planning & Community Development and Public Works staff so as to coordinate the department's activities with other City environmental initiatives as recommended under Goal 8.

- Strategy 9.2.2 To include water and air quality improvement measures developed under Objective 8.2 into park plans.
- Strategy 9.2.3 To apply environmental performance standards developed under Objective 8.3 to all park development projects.
- Strategy 9.2.4 To involve the Stream Health Coordinator in establishing water and air quality improvement measures developed under Objective 8.2 into park plans.
- Objective 9.3 To enhance facilities and programs to fully serve the population's diversity of needs.
- Strategy 9.3.1 To serve needs identified in public meetings and in the telephone survey administered during the development of the Comprehensive Recreation and Parks Master Plan 2003.
- Strategy 9.3.2 To develop and implement an ongoing process for evaluating public recreation needs, e.g., through general surveys, user surveys, public input meetings, and task forces.
- Objective 9.4 To develop, to the extent possible, an interconnected, accessible network of park and recreational facilities through development of a greenway system.
- Strategy 9.4.1 To create, to the extent possible, a network of pocket parks or green spaces that connect the City's parks with trails and linear open spaces. The Blacks Run Greenway plan describes such a greenway. Similar greenways are recommended along Cooks Creek and along a Norfolk Southern rail line recommended to be abandoned as described under Transportation Strategy 10.2.5.
- Strategy 9.4.2 To design the greenways not only to provide recreational opportunities, but also to provide riparian habitat, protection from flooding, pollution filtering and visual relief from urban development, to the extent possible.
- Strategy 9.4.3 To preserve the environmental and recreational values of these lands through enlightened conservation practices on City-owned lands and cooperative efforts with private landowners. The latter might include the purchase, acceptance of donation, and acceptance of proffers of land and easements from willing participants.
- Objective 9.5 To commit to providing high quality well distributed parks and recreation facilities.
- Strategy 9.5.1 To implement improvements at existing parks and recreation facilities as recommended in the Comprehensive Recreation and Parks Master Plan 2003, including major improvements as follows:
- expansion of the Cecil F. Gilkerson Community Center

- continue the development of Smithland Road Park property into a major community and athletic park.
 - development of the Smithland Road property into a major community and athletic park.
- Strategy 9.5.2 To plan for and develop a limited number of new parks as recommended in the Comprehensive Recreation and Parks Master Plan 2003, including:

 - neighborhood parks in the Waterman, Stone Spring, and Simms voting precincts
 - several new miniparks in urban areas around the City, including downtown
 - a new community recreation center in the southeastern sector of the City.
- Strategy 9.5.3 To cooperate with the public schools in making school recreation facilities available to the general public, as appropriate.
- Objective 9.6 To enhance the appearance, safety and maintenance of parks and recreation facilities.
- Strategy 9.6.1 To improve security at existing parks by evaluating use patterns, operation hours, visibility and maintenance.
- Strategy 9.6.2 To create a set of specific design guidelines and standards for City parks and facilities addressing landscaping, architectural design, accessibility, safety and crime prevention.
- Strategy 9.6.3 To incorporate ample landscaping in all park development.
- Strategy 9.6.4 To provide high quality maintenance so as to increase the effective use of facilities and maintain an attractive appearance.
- Strategy 9.6.5 To improve security in existing parks by evaluation use pattern, operating hours, visibility and maintenance.
- Strategy 9.6.6 Work in cooperation with Harrisonburg Police Department to establish police patrols and presence and hiring a security firm to monitor parks during peak usage seasons.